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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 000569

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SUBJECT: SLEEPY SUMMER FOR CANADIAN POLITICS

REF: OTTAWA 466

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Even by Canadian standards, political life in Canada in summer 2009 is remarkably comatose, at least on the surface. Neither the Prime Minister nor the Liberal Party leader has even been in the public eye for over ten days. They may both genuinely be on vacation or, like boxers, they may simply have retreated to their respective corners preparing for the next round of fighting after their bruising battles in June that almost led to a summer election (reftel). The tempo should pick up dramatically in September, with foreign travels likely for each leader as well as the resumption of Parliament on September 14. The probability of the Liberals working with the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democratic Party (NDP) to bring down the government in September or October and force yet another fall election appears to have diminished, perhaps giving the Conservatives at least until spring 2010 before facing the voters. The Conservatives may undertake a minor Cabinet reshuffle in August. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Canadians traditionally prize their summer vacations after their usually grueling, long winters, and even parliamentarians take very seriously their three month recesses. MPs are nonetheless often found at barbecues and other events in their "ridings" (districts) across the country and/or -- if they are Conservatives -- making announcements about new spending measures as part of the government's 2009 stimulus package. The almost sacrosanct nature of the short summer and briefly long days underscore what a strategic mistake it likely would have been had leader of the Official Opposition Liberal Party Michael Ignatieff carried through on his threat to bring down the government in June, primarily over Employment Insurance (reftel), instead of accepting a compromise bipartisan panel to offer its recommendations by September.

¶3. (C) While it is normal for senior politicians almost to disappear during the summer season, this year many Canadians will perhaps be making unfavorable comparisons between the active public agenda of President Obama in confronting key issues facing Americans versus the virtual invisible presence of their own leaders. Prime Minister Stephen Harper was last seen in public during his audience in Rome with the Pope on July 11, as well as a somewhat disastrous press conference at the G-8 in which he attacked Ignatieff for making remarks that it turned out Ignatieff had never made. (Both Harper and his press spokesman subsequently apologized publicly.) His office has issued a few public statements in his name -- on the 2010 visit of Queen Elizabeth II, the first meeting in space of two Canadian astronauts, the death of another Canadian soldier in Afghanistan, etc. -- but even his whereabouts are unknown to the public. In the office as usual? At the official summer residence at Harrington Lake? In his riding at Calgary? He apparently plans to take his son for a private visit to New York City July 31 to August 3. The Prime Minister's Office has also confirmed that the Prime Minister will be out of town on August 4, when a prospective CODEL may be in Ottawa. PM Harper will, of

course, take part in the North American Leaders' Summit in Guadalajara August 9-10. According to senior staffers, he also plans later in August to make a highly publicized visit to Nunavut, again to highlight this government's strong assertion of Canadian practical sovereignty over Canada's Arctic territories and to underscore its efforts to promote Arctic territories and to underscore its efforts to promote the welfare of aboriginal Canadians. He has expressed interest in early September for a working visit to Washington, but has not decided whether he will attend the UN General Assembly opening at the end of the month.

14. (C) Michael Ignatieff, since giving the Isaiah Berlin lecture in London on July 8, has retreated to his official residence in Ottawa (Stornaway), forgoing this year his usual summer holiday at his villa in Provence, according to Liberal Party staffers. He will begin in August to make a series of short pre-campaign forays around the country, but there are no indications of whether or when he will meet a self-imposed 100 day deadline (starting from his formal selection as party leader in Vancouver on April 30) to unveil the new Liberal Party policy platform (which will essentially also serve as the campaign platform in the next election). The Liberal Party has recently issued several statements in his name -- on the bombings in Jakarta, the latest death of a Canadian soldier, the British Order of Merit for former Prime Minister Chretien -- but the party website is currently dominated by photos and twitters about an imminent kayaking trip from Kingston to Ottawa by National Director Rocco Rossi. Ignatieff has, however, said previously that he plans a visit to China in early September, joined by Foreign Affairs critic Bob Rae. Rae also plans to meet with Deputy Secretary Steinberg in Washington on August 7.

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15. (C) Senior staffers from both major parties appear increasingly reluctant to think about a fall election and have indicated the growing likelihood that this government will survive at least until spring 2010, with the next budget in February the most likely opportunity for the Liberals to join forces with the NDP and the Bloc to oppose the government on a confidence vote. Many insiders have noted that many Bloc MPs will be working behind the scenes to keep the Conservatives in power until they qualify for their comfortable 20 year pensions in 2010, while the NDP may do the same out of concern that voters will abandon the NDP in the next election in order to put the Liberals in power -- knowing the NDP will never form the government. For the Liberals, however, election timing will, as always, depend on the polls, which will depend on the economy. If they wait too long and the economy improves more rapidly than expected, as now seems possible, their chances of defeating the Conservatives and forming their own minority government -- virtually no one expects a majority government to emerge out of the next election -- could diminish. With the Liberals and the Conservatives still neck-in-neck in most polls, the next election results remain a political crapshoot.

16. (C) The Conservatives may, however, decide to use the summer quiet to announce a minor Cabinet reshuffle, as they have done in the past. Finance Minister Jim Flaherty has been in the hot seat in the House of Commons for the handling of the recession and, however much the Conservatives boast that Canada's handling of the economy has been the soundest in the G-7, the time may have come for a new face. Natural Resources Minister Lisa Raitt -- once thought a new rising star -- and Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq have also faced much criticism for the handling of the medical isotope shortage and the H1N1 epidemic, respectively, and may wish to shift their portfolios. Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon has long seemed virtually uninterested in his portfolio; his decision to skip the ASEAN Regional Forum ministerial in Phuket this week as well as the recent sudden departure of a senior policy advisor may indicate that he wants to jump to a different department as well. Doing these reshuffles in

August will lessen the media coverage and commentary by pundits, as well as give new ministers the chance to read into their briefs before the opening of the House of Commons, and resumption of the daily Question Period, on September 14.

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